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The Social
Assistance
Review

La révision
de l'aide
sociale

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NEWS RELEASE

For Release
September 6, 1988

SARC RELEASES REPORT WITH EMPHASIS ON "TRANSITIONS" FOR RECIPIENTS

The Social Assistance Review Committee (SARC) today released its report, with a call for a major shift in the philosophy of Ontario's social assistance system. In its report the Committee recommends a new system which places an emphasis on helping recipients make the transition from dependence and isolation to self-reliance and integration within the community.

"The province has been enjoying a growing prosperity over the last few years," said Committee Chair George Thomson. "However, there is a growing number of people on social assistance who want to participate in Ontario society but are excluded.

"The current system was designed more than a quarter century ago. It fails to meet the basic income needs of recipients. Equally important, the system does very little to encourage recipients to increase their capacity for self-reliance. In many cases, it actually discourages people from leaving social assistance."

The report, which is called "Transitions", puts major emphasis on changing the social assistance system to an active program that supports the aspirations of recipients. A key element of this is the committee's recommendation for a new program called "opportunity planning".

Under the program, each recipient would work with an opportunity planner. "The opportunity planner would link the recipient with the resources he or she needs to move towards self-reliance," Mr. Thomson said. "For some recipients, this may mean moving from social assistance to work, for others it may mean moving from an institution to community living or simply being more involved in the life of the community."

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The committee's 648 page report contains 274 recommendations. They include:

- o new income programs for children and people with disabilities, which would take them and many sole-support parents out of the social assistance system;
- o elimination of rules which discourage recipients from working (eg. self employed people are ineligible; sole support parents who work full time lose their benefits regardless of the amount they earn);
- o elimination of unfair eligibility rules which automatically disqualify certain groups of people (eg. homeless persons are denied assistance because they lack an address);
- o measures such as income supplementation to help the working poor and to ensure that all recipients are "better off working";
- o new rates based on a "market basket" of essential goods and services;
- o one social assistance system rather than two, delivered by the province where necessary, but by municipalities where they can meet conditions for doing so;
- o "opportunity planning" with recipients to help them achieve self-reliance;
- o elimination of procedures which limit the rights of recipients (eg. recipients aren't given adequate notice of decisions affecting them);
- o elimination of discretion in a number of areas and measures to improve the exercise of discretion where it must exist;
- o elimination of distinctions which lead to recipients in similar circumstances being treated differently (eg. 60-64 year old men receive less in benefits than women of the same age);
- o whenever feasible, provision of service to recipients through mainstream ministries and programs (eg. dental care should be available to recipients through a Ministry of Health program which serves all low-income people);
- o elimination of the municipal contribution to the cost of allowances and benefits, replaced by an increased municipal contribution to other services such as child care;
- o native control over the design and delivery of social assistance for native people; and
- o access to services that support self-reliance or integration within the community eg. specialized programs for adolescent parents, child care, vocational rehabilitation, supported employment.

The reforms would be implemented over five stages:

- Stage One: Immediate changes to introduce many new incentives to work, to begin the move to adequate rates (particularly in the area of shelter) and to eliminate a host of unfair rules and procedures.
- Stage Two: New social assistance legislation creating a new, unified program.
- Stage Three: Full implementation of the new system.
- Stage Four: Income supplementation.
- Stage Five: Vision -- the long term changes to the income security system.

The major changes at the first stage would result in additional provincial and federal expenditures of between \$380 and \$415 million in 1988 dollars.


The Social Assistance Review Committee was appointed by Community and Social Services Minister John Sweeney in July, 1986. The committee conducted an extensive public hearing process. Committee members spent 23 days in public hearings in 14 communities across Ontario. More than 1,500 submissions were received from the public. The total cost of the report was approximately \$3 million.

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NEWS RELEASE

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COMMITTEE RECOMMENDS NEW SOCIAL ASSISTANCE RATES AND PUBLIC PROCESS TO ESTABLISH THEM

The Social Assistance Review Committee (SARC) recommends that the government adopt a definition of adequacy for social assistance rates and that rates be raised to reflect that definition. The recommendation is one of 274 in the Committee's report, which was released today.

"Current social assistance rates are the product of legislation which was produced more than 25 years ago," said Committee Chair George Thomson. "There is no logical, consistent method used to decide how much recipients should receive. As a result, the existing rates are too low, no matter how you measure them."

To address that concern, the committee has recommended that the rates be increased to purchase a so-called "market basket" of essential goods and services. The market basket would include basics such as food, shelter and clothing but would also contain items such as telephone services and household supplies.

The committee recommended that community spending patterns and the opinions of experts be taken into account in determining the cost of the "market basket" of goods and services. It also calls for legislation requiring regular public review of the "market basket" to ensure it remains adequate.

"We think the approach we have recommended will ensure that social assistance rates in the future are adequate to ensure recipients can live at a level we have called frugal comfort," Mr. Thomson said. "In the meantime, we have recommended some immediate rate increases, primarily to help recipients meet the high cost of shelter."

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The immediate changes would result in increases to the rates as follows: 10.1% for a single disabled person, 17.5% for a single parent with two children or a family of four and 22.5% for a single employable person. These rates would increase further over the next four stages to fully meet the committee's "market basket" definition of adequate rates.

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NEWS RELEASE

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SARC CALLS FOR NEW ROLES FOR MUNICIPALITIES AND THE PROVINCE

The Social Assistance Review Committee (SARC) has called for municipalities to take over the responsibility for delivering a new social assistance program, as long as they can meet certain conditions. In its report, released today, the Committee said in those municipalities which do not meet the conditions, the province should have the full responsibility for delivery of social assistance.

"The committee decided not to recommend that one or other level of government be responsible for delivery across the province," said Committee Chair George Thomson. "Instead, we have recommended an approach that recognizes the differing capacities of local governments from one part of the province to another."

Currently, municipalities are responsible for delivery of General Welfare Assistance while the province delivers Family Benefits. The committee recommends that those two programs be replaced by one, unified social assistance program.

The new program would be delivered by the municipality as long as it met a number of conditions. For example, the local government would have to be large enough and have the needed capacity to deliver the new program. The municipality would have to agree to engage in an annual planning process with the province. And the municipal program would have to meet the requirements of the French Language Services Act. If the conditions could not be met, the province would have full responsibility for delivery.

The committee also recommended that the province assume greater responsibility for establishing the essential elements of the program as well as clear standards for delivery so that the present variations across the province are eliminated.

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"The current system does not provide a consistent level of service throughout the province," said Committee Chair George Thomson. "A benefit which is provided in one part of Ontario might not be provided to a person in the same circumstances in the next county. I believe the recommendation for a single program, defined and controlled by the province and delivered by the government best suited to deliver it, will eliminate those variations, which are unfair to recipients."

The committee has also proposed a number of changes in the way the social assistance program is funded, including a proposal that the provincial and federal governments assume full financial responsibility for social assistance allowances and benefits. This, too, will help to ensure that the same program exists across the province.

The committee believes it isn't appropriate for social assistance allowances to be financed from the municipal tax base. Municipalities would be required to contribute to the cost of administration of social assistance and some of the money saved by the municipalities would be used to fund other needed social and support services, such as child care, which the committee recommends be mandatory for those recipients attempting to leave social assistance.

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SARC CALLS FOR NEW BENEFIT FOR WORKING POOR

The 12-member Social Assistance Review Committee (SARC) has called for the creation of a new program to top-up the wages of low income workers. The committee makes the recommendations in its report, which was released today.

The new program, to be called "income supplementation", would provide a financial benefit to people working at the minimum wage.

The committee says its recommendation has two goals. The first is to ensure people who are already working are able to keep working. The second is to provide social assistance recipients with an incentive to work. "In short," said Committee Chair George Thomson, "we want to make sure people are better off working."

"During our public hearings, we were struck by the number of recipients we met who wanted to work," he said. "But many of the existing policies penalize recipients who take jobs. It just doesn't make sense to keep people dependent upon social assistance when they want to work for a living. We feel that income supplementation, along with improvements in the minimum wage, would make work a better option than social assistance."

Mr. Thomson pointed out that income supplementation has been recommended by a number of other task forces and commissions, but added that it would entail negotiations between the federal and provincial governments. The committee has recommended that Queen's Park begin those negotiations as soon as possible.

The committee also made a number of other recommendations designed to help recipients get back into the workforce. These include eliminating rules which deny benefits to self-employed people and to sole-support parents who work more than 120 hours a month, regardless of their income.

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SARC also calls for a number of incentives to work that will ensure that all recipients are financially better off working. For example, the committee recommends the right to deduct actual work expenses such as child care and the implementation of a grace period during which new social assistance recipients do not have to sell off essential assets.

Under the SARC recommendations, recipients who find work would not lose benefits such as drugs and dental care until they earned enough money to cover the average costs of those benefits. Ultimately, the committee says those benefits should be provided through mainstream programs that serve all low-income people, including those who work.

SARC has also recommended an expansion in the availability of support services which help recipients obtain and maintain work, such as employment training, vocational rehabilitation and mandatory child care when needed.

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SARC ADVOCATES NATIVE CONTROLLED SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

The Social Assistance Review Committee has recommended legislative control over social assistance and other social programs for native people be transferred to aboriginal governments. The proposal is one of 274 recommendations in the committee's report, which was released today.

102 of Ontario's 127 Indian Bands already deliver their own social assistance. But the program they deliver is no different than that delivered by Ontario municipalities. The committee's suggestion would give first nations the responsibility for designing their own social assistance programs.

Committee Chair George Thomson said the recommendation reflects the unique culture and constitutional status of Ontario's native people.

"Ontario's first citizens have suffered disproportionately from poverty, discrimination and alienation," he said. "The social assistance system has not helped relieve that suffering, largely because it isn't appropriate to native culture. Only native people can ensure a system which reflects their unique history and customs."

The committee identified three distinct steps in accomplishing the transfer of the social assistance system to native control.

First, the committee said, a variety of short term reforms should be implemented immediately. These reforms would address ongoing irritants between Indian Bands and the province, such as better coverage of high costs in the remote north and improved opportunities to take part in new programs.

The second step recommended by the committee would require the development of new provincial legislation to provide for agreements between the province and Native communities so that those communities can design and deliver their own social assistance programs. This would also require the support of the federal government, the province and first nations to renegotiate the Indian Welfare Agreement.

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In addition, the committee called for agreements to be negotiated with Native agencies enabling them to deliver specific forms of social assistance to Native people living off reserve.

The final step would involve Natives assuming authority over a broad range of social and other programs.

The committee recommended that, at all stages, the changes be consistent with the expressed desire of Native people for aboriginal self-government.

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SARC ADVOCATES NEW PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The Social Assistance Review Committee (SARC) has called for new income support programs to better meet the needs of children and people with disabilities.

"Few people realize that the vast majority of the beneficiaries of social assistance are children, their sole support parents and people with disabilities," said George Thomson, the Committee's Chair. "Our proposals would substantially improve the benefits provided to these groups."

In effect, the Committee's proposals would remove both children and disabled people from the social assistance system. The result would be a significantly reduced social assistance system.

Mr. Thomson said that this would help bring the system back to its original purpose of serving those people who have temporarily fallen outside the mainstream of community life. At the same time, it would rationalize and replace the existing array of income programs for disabled persons and children.

The report suggests that a two part income support program be implemented for all people with disabilities. The first component would be a comprehensive disability insurance program providing benefits for disability due to accident, illness or injury. People with disabilities, but not eligible for disability insurance, would qualify for a disability benefit, the second element of the new program.

Disability insurance and the disability benefit would rationalize and replace most existing income programs for the disabled, including social assistance.

The committee also recommended that the income needs of children be met by replacing present income programs for children with a new income-tested tax credit. The credit would provide \$3,300 per child in 1988 dollars. All low and some middle income parents would receive the credit.

"This measure would help reduce the incidence of child poverty, something the current system doesn't adequately address," Mr. Thomson said.

The committee also believes that, by ensuring sole-support parents have the money to meet their children's basic needs, it will be possible for most of those now on social assistance to achieve self-reliance. "Since most sole-support parents are women, this would have a major impact on the feminization of poverty," said Mr. Thomson.

The committee's proposals would require a major restructuring of the income security system. The committee sees them as long term measures, which would require extensive negotiations between the provincial and federal governments.

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RAISE IN RATES URGED TO MAKE SHELTER AFFORDABLE

The Social Assistance Review Committee (SARC) recommended today that recipients of social assistance be reimbursed for the full cost of their rent, up to a ceiling based on average shelter costs.

"The current system uses a complicated formula to reimburse recipients for only a portion of their shelter costs. As a result, many recipients pay 50-70% of their allowance on shelter, and benefits intended for food and other necessities are being used to pay the rent," said SARC Chair George Thomson. "By implementing the changes recommended by the committee, we will have a system which meets the real shelter costs of most recipients."

Under the system recommended by SARC, recipients will be reimbursed for the actual rent they pay, up to a maximum based on the rental cost survey conducted regularly by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. According to the Committee, the maximum should be higher in communities with very high rental cost.

Mr. Thomson pointed out however that "measures to help recipients pay for shelter will not be effective unless they are accompanied by other initiatives. We must ensure there is an adequate supply of affordable housing and that, where necessary, people have the support they need to live in their communities."

The committee recommended a number of measures to increase the supply of housing. They include:

- o the use of publicly owned lands to create affordable housing;
- o ensuring municipal official plans and by-laws support affordable housing, including the addition of rental units to existing housing. As well, they should protect against the loss of affordable housing through conversions to more expensive units;
- o a substantial investment in the rehabilitation of existing rental housing stock;
- o a major increase in the Rent Supplementation program to help, in the short term, those who are currently waiting for subsidized housing.

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The committee also made proposals designed to increase housing-related supports to recipients, including:

- o more "portable services" to allow recipients with special needs to live independently in community settings;
- o better municipal regulation of boarding houses; and
- o a requirement that all municipalities provide emergency accommodation for homeless people.

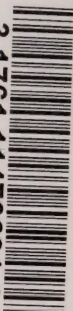
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